Mediated resistance in post-Soviet communicative ecologies: the case of 'Chinese industrial park' in Belarus

Abstract

The paper adopts a 'communicative ecologies' framework and problematizes it further by exploring a collective protest campaign in post-Soviet Belarus. This study explains how mediated civic protest communication is embedded in the socio-economic, political and cultural structures of a society. It focuses on a recent case involving civic resistance towards the construction of a so-called 'Chinese industrial park' near the capital of Belarus. The 5-year timespan (2012-2017) from the conception of this controversial project to its actual implementation is particularly suitable for exploring the complex interdependencies between traditional and new media in the framing of grassroots protest within semi-authoritarian post-Soviet settings.

Key words: communicative ecologies, civic, resistance, post-Soviet**,** Belarus

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Introduction

A number of digitally-enabled protest movements worldwide – such as the G20 protest in Toronto, Occupy Wall Street in the USA and Indignados in Spain – symbolize people's disillusionment with traditional forms of political organization and representation as well as their desire to be directly involved in social change (Milan and Hintz, 2013; Poell, 2014). However, the crisis of civic participation in liberal Western democracies (Dalton, 2008) is conditioned by a different constellation of factors than that of civic (non)participation in the post-Soviet states. Here misunderstandings of the notion of democracy, its principles and procedures (Semetko and Krasnoboka, 2003)[1] have translated into an overreliance on informal networks (Ledeneva, 1998), passivity and a narrow set of issues of public concern (Artsiomenka, 2015), as well as pronounced self-censorship and general mistrust (Herasimenka, 2016). These features are also apparent in the online communicative realm (Fossato et al., 2008), raising the question of whether one should adopt a different take on digital media-supported collective activism in the post-Soviet context? This is a particularly timely inquiry because it addresses the lack of theorisation around dilemmas of (digital) civic activism in post-Soviet settings, which only a few studies (e.g. Karatzogianni et al., 2017; Toepfl, 2017; Oates, 2013) have recently examined.

This paper's specific setting is the underexplored post-Soviet state of Belarus, which gained independence after the fall of the USSR in 1990. Governed by President A. Lukashenko for more than 20 years, the country maintains close links to its Soviet past (Parker, 2007), as well as strategically balances between the EU and Russia, currently seeking better ties with the West (Wemer, 2019). It exerts tight control over traditional (Rice-Oxley, 2014) and new media (Freedom House, 2018; Shearlaw, 2014). Belarus has one of the least free press in the world, being ranked 155 out of 180 states in a recent survey (World, 2018) with the overall low freedom ranking of 6 out of 7 (Freedom House, 2018). Stringent media legislation is combined with 'active surveillance and data mining' (Deibert and Rohozinski, 2010, p. 27), propaganda, infotainment, *kompromat* (compromising material) dissemination and misinformation online.

The country's previously low levels of internet use are changing rapidly (partially due to access via mobile devices and 3G standard (Pet'ko, 2013)) – broadband usage increased from 10% in 2010 to almost 70% in 2012 (Aliaksandrau, 2013). In 2012, 47% of Belarusians used the internet, with 24% of the urban population accessing it via mobile phones. Users are predominantly young (30% between 15 and 24) and well-educated – almost 40% have a higher-level degree (Aliaksandrau, 2013). The most popular social platform is the Russian-language VKontakte (similar to Facebook), followed by Odnoklassniki (Belarus Profile-Media, 2016).

Post-Soviet Belarus is a unique case. In contrast to neighbouring Russia (Ryabovolova, 2017; Toepfl, 2017; Sherstobitov, 2014), the Belarusian public remains largely passive, demonstrates little appetite for collective action protesting and displays fragmented solidarities (Shearlaw, 2014)[2]. Even the proposal for a new nuclear power plant did not provoke substantial societal reaction, despite the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster. One of the few effective public protest campaigns include a smaller instance of online-driven dissent following the unfair use of traffic police force (Lobodenko and Kozlik, 2008) and a larger street protest in 2017 which

[1] E.g. Parties are viewed with scepticism as advancing their own agenda and civil society is viewed as controlled by the state rather than being an 'intermediary' between the people and the state (Brel, 2015).

[2] Solidarity, which is the 'unity or agreement of feeling or action, especially among individuals with a common interest', forms the key concept of this study (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, n.d.).

was triggered by a decree introducing a so-called 'social parasite' tax on those who work fewer than 183 days per year (BBC, 2017).

To explore these peculiarities of post-Soviet digital media-enabled civic resistance, I scrutinize the framing of one particular case of resistance[3] – the construction of a large-scale Chinese industrial park in Belarus. This study strives to: (i) uncover emerging modes of usage of (digital) media for *civic activism* in semi-centralized post-Soviet states; (ii) clarify the role of the national socio-political and media context in shaping digitally-enabled protest activism, (iii) explain the dynamic of framing in the process of protest communication and, finally, (iv) investigate the potential of digital media to challenge a society's status quo.

The paper starts by describing its theoretical framework, then it outlines the methodological approach and analyses data from several mainstream state and alternative media outlets (2012-2017). Finally, it clarifies why this resistance campaign failed to coalesce, placing the discussion within a wider context of post-Soviet communicative ecologies and suggesting further avenues of research.

Theoretical framework

Early research into the democratizing potential of digital media adopted a rather instrumental, reductionist and deterministic view, considering online activism as either irrelevant or directly feeding into offline action (e.g. Ward and Vedel, 2006; Oates, 2013), which resulted in profound socio-political changes and '*progressive* collective action' (Mercea et al., 2016, p. 286). However, an emerging body of literature acknowledges the need for a more nuanced understanding of the role of media technologies in social (protest) movements (Dahlgren, 2007), considering the role of 'affect' (Papacharissi, 2016) and other contextual factors which contribute to a complex interplay of the offline/online participatory dynamic (Gerbaudo, 2016; Dahlberg and Siapera, 2007; Wimmer, et al., 2017).

Despite these attempts to overcome digital reductionism, further advances are needed. Firstly, the research tends to focus on large-scale (successful) movements originating in (predominantly) Western societies (e.g. Gerbaudo, 2016; Poell, 2014), ignoring the variety of (typically smaller-scale) digital media-assisted protest movements in developing and transitional countries. Secondly, scholarship overlooks the role of traditional (and now convergent) media in agenda setting and interconnecting with digitally-enabled protests (with some exceptions, such as Trere and Mattoni, 2015). Thirdly, there is a lack of recognition that practices of mediated civic engagement are rooted in different contexts (Wimmer et al., 2017), including economic, socio-cultural, historical and political factors. Fourthly, the long-term dynamic of these protest movements or 'a neglected temporal dimension' (Mercea et al., 2016, p. 285), needs to be explored further.

This study draws on a communicative ecologies framework or 'an ecology of communication' embracing 'the structure, organization, and accessibility of information technology, various forums, media, and channels of information' (Altheide, 2013:223). In turn, the systemic stance by Nardi and O'Day termed 'information ecology' presupposes an interconnected 'system of people, practices, values, and technologies in a particular local environment' (1999, p. 49). This approach has three dimensions: technological (devices), social (modes of organization) and discursive (content, framing and meanings). Whilst acknowledging all three dimensions, this study concentrates on the latter aspect. A previous insight into both traditional collective civic mobilization (Benford and Snow, 2000), and

[3] Although I use the notions of protest, mobilization and resistance interchangeably, this protest was quite localized, never reaching a large-scale offline demonstration-type protest (despite the issue potentially affecting almost 2 million people).

digitally-enabled connective action[4] approaches (Pond and Lewis, 2017) demonstrated a particular importance of framing in (de)legitimising protest campaigns.

An in-depth inquiry into peculiarities of the post-Soviet context informing regional communicative ecologies (such as high cultural incoherence)[5] goes beyond the scope of this paper. What is important to highlight here is the dominant role of traditional media (Beumers et al., 2008). Despite opportunities to access a variety of information sources, post-Soviet publics tend to rely on state news media, displaying a relatively high degree of trust and low media literacy (Melnikava, 2013). Furthermore, the establishment's symbolic construction of various forms of dissents' expression as negative[6], the pronounced control (Beisembayeva, 2013; Shearlaw, 2014) of an ever more 'hybrid[izing] media system' (Chadwick, 2013), and the legacy of self-censorship and general mistrust (Herasimenka, 2016) all complicate the coordination, sustainability and, even, conception of grassroots resistance initiatives[7].

This particular combination of political and media systems in Belarus must be taken into account when viewed within a more holistic communicative ecology paradigm. There is some disagreement about the relationship between public protest movements and media. Some see it as more asymmetric (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993) and others as more interdependent (Della Porta, 2011; Chadwick, 2013). Della Porta (2011) highlights the movements' agency and its audience's ability to 'interpret' messages. However, how this relationship with various media is shaped and to what extend the movement can exercise its agency in structuring and articulating its claims depends on a number of contextual factors. I argue that this relationship will be less symmetric in case of Belarus and the Park movement's agency will be significantly limited by the described above domestic features. The movement in question is examined below.

Case study: 'Chinatown'

This paper focuses on the case of an ambitious initiative to create a large-scale 'Chinese-Belarusian industrial park' ('the Park'), which constitutes a special 'economic' zone with favourable tax conditions, 25km from the capital Minsk (http://www.industrialpark.by/en/). Agreement was reached between China and Belarus in 2010 and ratified by Belarus's president in June 2012. In July 2014, the Park was named the 'Great Stone' (*Vialiki kamen* in Belarusian) after one of (the numerous) villages to be 'subsumed' by the project's construction site of more than 80 square km. The original idea was to build an entire 'city' involving approximately 600,000 Chinese workers (Kitaiskii, 2014). However, over the course of 5 years (2012-2017), the stated number of residents and type of industries changed. There is still a lack of transparency about how many Chinese workers are going to participate in its construction, and it is still unclear whether 'high-tech' industries will form the core of the Park, since casinos and other businesses have also been mentioned (V Kitaisko-belarsuskom, 2013). Among other issues surrounding this project, there are questions of governance (potentially replacing local oversight); ownership (allegedly 60% of the shares are owned by China and only 40% by Belarus); finance – most of the infrastructure investment originates from a Chinese loan (Under

[4] Connective action focuses on the role of individuals in mobilizing their social media networks and the use of personalized action frames which encourage diverse publics' identification with that action (Bennet and Segerberg, 2013).

[5] It includes the slow and complex changes brought about by the transition to a market economy (e.g. the culture of profligacy), the emergence of diverse accessible interpretations of the world due to an increase of individualization and the localization of social life, as well as the proliferation of potentially conflicting subcultures. Furthermore, there is a widespread misunderstanding of the notion of democracy, its principles and procedures (Semetko and Krasnoboka, 2003) have translated into an overreliance on informal networks (Ledeneva, 1998), passivity and a narrow set of issues of public concern (Artsiomenka, 2015).

[6] The Belarusian state media's long-term framing of oppositional circles as 'Western' agents, elitists who are detached from the public, creates an ambivalent or negative attitude towards these groups and the media outlets related to them. For an example from this campaign, see Kitaiskii tekhnopark (2012).

[7] In the relatively small country of Belarus the personal and collective costs of being involved in public resistance campaigns via social media are high. For instance, the 'anonymity' of online activists can be easily uncovered, and their identity and location traced. This was disclosed in a confidential interview with a prominent Belarusian independent political analyst in 2011.

Red, 2016; Kitaiskii, 2014), as well as the Park's proximity to a nature reserve and the capital's water supply (Zhitelyam, 2012; Gonchar, 2012).

Methodology

Framing is central to our understanding of 'the character and the course of social movements' (Benford and Snow, 2000, p. 611, 628). However, as Pond and Lewis (2017) note, the role of discourse, framing and hegemonic meanings in shaping social action in the digital era remains overlooked. Here I follow Entman's understanding of framing, as a process of selecting 'some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation' (1993, p. 52). In order to explicate how this framing dynamic is embedded in the socio-cultural context (Benford and Snow, 2000, p. 628), the paper also utilises elements of the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). It allows uncovering relationships of power behind the media texts and deconstructing the cultural dynamics and power relations, which are embedded in language through the reproduction of certain types of statements, thematic choices, and concepts (Fairclough, 1995).

I screened the mediated civic resistance initiatives related to the Park (2012-2017) and analysed the dynamic of the Park's framing loosely informed by the CDA within the hybrid media ecologies, highlighting the *tensions between the key voices and the appropriation and subversion of activists' frames by the mainstream media.* The data sources include TV broadcasts on the main state TV (ONT), YouTube clips on 'alternative' channels (by Marat Minskii and from a political movement called *Gavary praudu,* GP (Tell the Truth)). I cross-referenced this data with state media coverage (e.g. the key state newspaper *Belarus Today*), with relevant forums on the two most popular news portals (tut.by and online.by[8]), and the GP's web portal zapraudu.info.

My analysis starts with an overview of the civic campaign's preferred communication channels and online communications strategies, followed by a more in-depth inquiry into the way this grassroots resistance campaign was framed by the state and alternative media. I predominantly focus on the TV and YouTube productions and related online comments. The frames, which were identified inductively by looking at recurring themes, include: legal frames (accountability, transparency and compliance with the law); political (corruption and geopolitics); economic (progress and prosperity, ownership); social (welfare, safety, inter-ethnic cohesion), and environmental ones. The frames from online forums also included personal frames (e.g. wellbeing) and related emotions (passivity, powerlessness, frustration).

Civic resistance and the hybrid post-Soviet communicative ecologies

The type and dynamic of the campaign

Public protest is traditionally seen as a non-institutional form of participation (Mercea et al., 2016). However, the variety of media forms currently available for civic activism is changing the nature of protest campaigning. Bennet and Segerberg (2012) have identified three types of digital action networks, ranging from 'organizationally brokered' to 'crowd-enabled' action. Their third, 'in-between' type, the 'organizationally enabled connective action network' most appropriately reflects this campaign. The Park protest was a hybrid one involving both non-institutional, spontaneously-formed grassroots networks and several institutionalized entities such as green NGOs including Ecodom (Gradiushko, 2013), affected allotments' collectives and the oppositional political movement, GP.

[8] Their popularity is confirmed by a poll in October 2017 (https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=200153).

In the context of a lack of home-grown charismatic figures, a renowned Belarusian poet Uladzimir Niakliaeu,[9] the GP's leader, was the apparent front-runner to lead the movement. However, he was unable to capitalize on his celebrity status and articulate a clear-cut strategy of intervening in the institutionalized forms of policy debates. GP's involvement was seen as 'corrupting' the movement (discussed below), rather than boosting the campaign's credibility, providing a focal unifying point or basis for sustainability. Additionally, the enduring online engagement of several key grassroot figures (e.g. onliner.by) was not necessarily associated with their desire to officially lead the campaign. This shortage of credible leaders with enhanced social capital who were embedded within influential networks resulted in sporadic and inadequate initiatives with low transfer between on/offline activities, and a more disjointed institutionalized and a grassroots type of activism.

My longitudinal inquiry found a fluctuation of interest in the issue, with high levels of civic activism at the start (2012) gradually decreasing over the monitoring period – 2012-2017[10] as other, more pressing issues diverted people's attention. After the first announcements about the Park in January 2012, public discontent was expressed both online and offline, despite the cold winter weather (Gonchar, 2012). There was a quick response from the state media in February-April, reassuring people that their property rights would be protected (Zhiteliam, 2012). Despite attempts to drum up support and mobilize the public throughout 2012 (e.g. following announcements of high numbers of Chinese migrants (BDG, 2012) and GP's vlogs involving affected residents), the momentum was lost. This loss of endurance and sustainability is a common feature of citizens' movements (Poell, 2014).

The repertoire of communication channels

Digital and social divides conditioned the media channels preferred and the types of communication undertaken during this campaign. Most directly-affected people were rural citizens who lacked significant social capital and digital media literacy[11]. Their media habits and patterns of access were predominantly focused on traditional communication channels involving low-tech mediums such as posters and leaflets, discussions in small groups during meetings at the regional authorities' headquarters (in Smolevichi) and allotment offices. This strategy was lawful, in line with established norms and available communication channels (e.g. petitions are consistent with 'the rules of the system'); violent participation was not practiced[12].

Online mediation of the issue was often done by the relatives (e.g. children) of those affected. It enriched the repertoire of communication practices via the use of converging media such as digital platforms (YouTube, forums, online blogs, etc.). This dynamic is similar to that uncovered by the study of Kyrgys protests (Srinivasan and Fish, 2011). Despite using a 'complex ensemble of communication practices' (Trere and Mattoni, 2016, p. 297), the campaign was unique in its reliance on traditional forms of engagement, although there was some involvement of digital media (for coordination, awareness raising, etc.).

Campaigners' online communication strategies

The campaigners[13] capitalized on the reputation of established online news portals (tut.by, onliner.by), using their forum discussions to share relevant personal stories, drum up interest

[9] Who previously ran for the presidency in 2010.

[10] The forum at Onliner.by is a good example of this: https://forum.onliner.by/viewtopic.php?t=3749762&start=1100

[11] Two of the few affected groups with more substantial social capital included pensioners from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and former residents of the capital in full-time employment who had decided to move out to the 'green belt'.

[12] However, the choice of less disruptive actions might stem from the fear of intimidation (Borovoi, 2012) employed by the state on this and similar occasions in the past (BBC, 2017), rather than from a perception of the institutions as 'legitimate powerholders' (Milan and Hintz, 2013: 20). Intimidation in this case included detaining the GP's key figures (Dmitrieva, 2012) and citizens' accounts on forums that they had been summoned to report to the police (Onliner, 2012).

[13] In this case, the campaigners include both those directly affected by the Park and those who expressed their online resistance out of solidarity with them. A further in-depth injury is needed to establish a more precise demographic of those involved.

and support, and encourage people to sign petitions. These tactics involved low levels of effort and innovation, but revealed some inventiveness in framing. Thus, one of the forum headlines linked this protest to another controversial proposal for a new ring road around the capital, to attract the attention of a wider audience (Onliner, 2012). GP also experimented by posting several YouTube clips featuring interviews with residents affected by the project (discussed below).

However, the campaign showed limited subversive and creative ways to challenge the status quo. For instance, there was a lack of ambiguous humorous memes (more) suitable for overcoming state control. This is in a sharp contrast with the diverse visual viral humour triggered by the 'social parasite' tax. In this case a few metaphors include Chinatown (*Kitai Gorod*), *Chinese Sloboda* (alluding to a historically-common term for the region *Sloboda* – a confined settlement with particular, usually more favourable, regulations), *New Vasiuki* (a neologism from a satirical literary work denoting unrealistic plans); Dead Stone (the death of Belarusian industry) or Idle Stone (*Lezhachii kamen'*), which alludes to a well-known saying[14] and implies passivity, idleness and an expectation of rewards without effort. However, they all failed to resonate with the wider audience, so there was no key motto or a unifying slogan for the Park's campaign. Moreover, these scarce images mostly played on the contrast between pristine Belarusian landscapes and the imagined negative consequences of this and similar ventures in China (e.g. *Kitaiskaya Sloboda,* n.d.).

Thus, multiple channels of communication served a number of purposes, such as awareness raising, informing and updating people about the situation (e.g. updates about locations and timings of the on-site 'consultation' meetings which were deliberately inconveniently scheduled by the authorities). Digital media was predominantly used for coordination rather than to gain wider support or appeal to various societal groups (including a more technologically-savvy younger audience who could potentially enrich campaign's limited spectrum of online practices and initiatives). Evidently, the media logic (of particular digital media platforms) and an ecology of communication in Belarusian context had an impact on social mediation (Altheide, 2013) enabling some activities (e.g. online petitions), modifying others (limiting creative experiments with the digital media) or disabling them altogether due to the presumed surveillance.

Framing dissent in post-Soviet communicative ecologies

A more inclusive media ecology presupposes accounting for the role of both state and independent, traditional and new media, which is especially crucial in semi-authoritarian settings which have strict controls of information. Here, I consider the state TV coverage of the case. The Belarusian alternative mediasphere includes such institutionalized outlets as the oppositional newspaper *Nasha Niva* and the TV station *Belsat,* broadcasting from Poland. Their existence indicates the state's strategies for tolerating alternative voices for, possibly, further containment, co-optation and control. Some of these media outlets (like *Belsat*) do not provide a strong counter-narrative, in case they might be seen as being sponsored by the West or/and 'preaching to the converted'. Bearing this in mind, instead, I look at the use of YouTube (as an 'alternative' TV constituting another end of the spectrum), both by grassroots activists and institutionalized organizations like GP.

The mainstream media's frames

Originally, the state media largely ignored the issue. However, as the conflict progressed, public opposition to the Park became a mainstream media matter. Unusually, the main state TV channel ONT devoted part of its prime-time evening talk show 'Open format' (*Otkrytyi*

[14] *Pod lezhachijkamen i voda ne techet* ('water does not run under a stone').

format) to the subject in April 2012. This programme is no longer available online in the TV station's archive or on any other independent platform in full[15]. The strategies this show employed included promoting different dominant frames; appropriating and subverting the protestor's frames; suppression, silencing and disinformation.

The discussion was framed overall as a property issue, under the general topic 'Private Property'. Public wellbeing was briefly mentioned (with this part of the discussion excluded from the televised version (*V tok shou*, 2012)), in conjunction with the stress caused by the general uncertainty and likelihood of property loss[16]. The establishment tackled the growing dissent in two ways – by claiming that lots of 'people support the idea' and that they would act in accordance with the law. The presenter's call to 'honestly guarantee transparency' in decision making about properties potentially affected by the Park was met with repeated reassurances from the bureaucrats (representing the regional and Minsk authorities), referring to 'their obligation to follow the legislation'. However, their demeanour was self-assured and somewhat dismissive. They evidently felt little pressure from the small studio audience. The final message voiced by the presenter was *'smirenie'*, or acceptance of the situation.

The only critical voice came from the lawyer on the panel, Andrey Vashkevich, who acknowledged the issues arising from state legislation (e.g. the decision about land ownership and legislation that prioritized 'state needs' over citizens'), a lack of required consultation with the public before announcing the project, absence of relevant documentation or preparation, such as environmental expertise and a business plan; and evasion in defining 'objective' criteria and reasons for demolition). His expert knowledge and ability to construct and defend a counter-narrative was met with silence or cautious responses from the bureaucrats. Ostensibly, the programme acknowledged the community's grievances, whilst mainstreaming the frames of accountability, transparency and compliance with the law and downplaying controversies around environmental concerns, personal wellbeing and social welfare issues. Overall, by acknowledging the issue on mainstream TV, the state fostered the image of its own transparency, accountability and responsiveness.

However, this 'recognition' of dissent did not lead to any significant amplification of general interest. On the contrary, it diverted the public's attention – instead of boosting the campaign's appeal, it changed its momentum by providing reassurance that the campaigners' voices were being heard. Furthermore, the traditional media utilized some of the movement's language to echo the concerns expressed. The frame of accountability and guaranteed property rights, which were deemed crucial for the protesters, was recirculated in media coverage. However, the content of the frame (property ownership) changed with the passage of time. The authorities were seen to 'listen to the public' without forcing them to move out, honouring demands to 'keep their dachas/land'. However, in practice, people had to accept that the Park being built on their doorsteps would potentially preclude them from selling their property. Furthermore, by reducing the dissenters to the smaller and less influential group of allotment owners (Galkin, 2012) and villagers (Lavnikevich, 2012), the state media was able to reframe the scale of the issue.

Subsequently, there was a change in mainstream media coverage, which revealed the following trends. Firstly, some of the issues were silenced, e.g. the top-down U-turns related to the types of industries that would be in the Park; pollution, health and related issues[17]. Secondly, some issues (e.g. the number of Chinese settlers)[18] were covered in contradictory or

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[15] This fact and inactive links to other relevant reports indirectly indicate the scope of online filtering. The only active link to this part of the programme is https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wcxm_Y7VVNg&app=desktop

[16]The presenter tried to probe several bureaucrats on the panel somewhat provocatively – 'are you ready to sell your soul to the devil for money?'

[17] E.g. recent residents' complaints about the Park's proximity to the building site (https://www.currenttime.tv/a/26982679.html) and official reporting about the Park's successful construction (http://www.ctv.by/белорусско-китайский-индустриальный-парк)

[18] The contradictory state coverage fragmented dissenters, who were left to discuss such issues as the changes in the Park's remit and number of expected migrants in 2013 http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=113085&lang=ru linking to the official statements at

misleading ways, such as guarantees of private ownership (which was neglected in practice), or protection of the local ecosystem (followed by deforestation to clear the way for the Park). Thirdly, the media framed the Park as beneficial for the common good, putting a positive spin on it by mainstreaming the frame of economic prosperity. Hence, by foregrounding the frame of Belarus's economic interests (with the sub-themes of progress, profitability and prosperity, e.g. *Kitaiskii tekhnopark,* 2012), the state media diverted attention away from other pressing issues. In addition, highlighting the Park's potential benefits simultaneously discredited its opponents (Galkin, 2012) and called for wider public support, inferring that thinking otherwise was a form of disloyalty to Belarus's future.

Thus, the establishment – possibly taking into account previous new media-enabled protests (Lobodenko and Kozlik, 2008) – adopted a two-stage strategy. First, it acknowledged the public's grievances at the height of the protests (Zhiteliam, 2012; *V tok shou,* 2012) but then side-lined these frames. While providing the protest movement with some form of recognition (by placing its demands in front of the wider public), the media simultaneously mainstreamed different frames (prosperity), manipulated the existing ones and silenced more problematic issues (e.g. omitting controversial environmental aspects to only report more positive ones, such as installing water purification/recycling technology in the Park (Ben'ko, 2016)). In this way, the official media's mediation of dissent acted as a safety valve whilst simultaneously reframing it to undermine the movement's focus and, possibly, dynamic.

Originally, the campaign was driven by the movement itself (e.g. petition signing) while, at a later stage, it was more news-driven, echoing the dominant themes in mainstream media. Furthermore, even the state media's silencing of certain issues contributed to the diffusion of online communication, as some campaigners became preoccupied with conspiracy theories. A follow-up study is needed to establish how far the inconsistent state reporting contributed towards fragmenting activist campaigning.

Alternative media's frames

Here I examine several video clips (and people's reactions to them) posted by GP and a popular vlogger with his own YouTube channel called Marat Minskii (2017). The first example is a 3-minute speech by GP's leader Uladzimir Niakliaeu, made early on in the campaign (in February 2012). This is a traditional statement filmed (probably) in a flat with antique furniture, a painting, a clock and a disputed white-red-white flag in the background. Niakliaeu articulates a number of frames: property rights, the environment, lack of transparency, arguable economic benefits and corruption. Despite picking up on the key points, though, he does not provide any evidence to support his claims. Even the source of the 20,000 residents who he states will be directly affected is unclear. The pronouncement remains at the level of generalization ('this is a pressing issue') and speculations about the 'real' purpose of the Park, calling it *New Vasiuki* (a Chinese hub on a way to Europe; an entertainment centre with casinos). The clip was viewed less than 2,200 times, with only three (negative) comments posted (Niakliaeu, 2012), repeating previously-articulated doubts about the poet's ability and motivation to become a politician.

Next, the GP's series of YouTube clips of residents affected by the Park cover the frames of property ownership, the environment and prosperity (e.g. https://zapraudu.info/kitajskij-texnopark-po-prezhnemu-ostryj-vopros-dlya-prostyx-grazhdan/ and https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=Ad01Us-Lm4g). They do not represent a sufficiently shocking spectacle to sustain the audience's interest. Predictably mundane scenery and the depiction of the rural community's everyday life failed to add momentum to the campaign.

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http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2012/12/13/ic_news_116_ and http://www.belta.by/ru/all_news/society/Tozik-sluxi-o-priezde-600-tys-kitajtsev-dlja-raboty-v-texnoparke-pod-Minskom---polnaja-chush_i_593878.html; http://www.economy.gov.by/ru/comments/kommentarij-k-brifingu-o-kitajsko-belorusskom-industrialnom-parke_i_0000001455.html and http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=113085&lang=ru])

Further limited engagement with the GP's online initiatives (characterized by low viewing figures) includes the campaign website, which was mostly used to aggregate news about the Park from other platforms and to publish petitions. Online comments confirm an ingrained suspicion of institutionalized entities (especially political parties) and reveal a perception that the GP was appropriating, or even hijacking, the grassroots' agenda for its own ends (e.g. comments on the GP's own website: https://zapraudu.info/mixail-pashkevich-grazhdanskij-dogovor-kitajskij-texnopark-bolshe-dorozhe-cinichnee/).

Marat Minskii's recent 12-minute video (2017), called 'The new landlord of Belarus?' *(V Belarusi novyj khozyain?)* is in stark contrast to Niakliaeu's speech. It has been viewed more than 117,000 times and attracted 978 comments (as of 1 November 2017)[19]. Marat 'reports' from a plain room with a desk. In his ironical manner and including inter-textual resources (popular post/Soviet and Western cultural material), he outlines the geopolitical vector of a Belarus torn between the West and Russia which includes a new 'Chinese' dimension. He covers the preferential treatment of Chinese investors in the Park (in contrast to Belarusian businesses), the Belarusian establishment's short-sightedness (pursuing short-term economic benefits), and perplexing local developments (such as closing the bicycle factory in Minsk due to bankruptcy and its possible transfer to competitors in the Park). Some of his frames touch upon issues of state security, for instance, 'gifts' from the Chinese government in the form of military equipment to fight terrorism, or 'free of charge' construction work in Belarus.

He omits the formerly dominant issue of property/land ownership, environment, social welfare and safety. Most of his frames relate to the economy (rules, regulations, cooperation, prosperity, etc.) or establishment corruption. The only pronounced point of cross-reference and continuity between these two videos is the acknowledgment of state hostility towards indigenous people (*korennoe naselenie)*, which neglects the Belarusian people's best interests. This frame threads through numerous online posts elsewhere (e.g. Onliner, 2012).

Further exploration of the posts under Minskii's blog and on two major forums (Onliner, 2012; tut.by, 2017), and comments under articles such as Ben'ko, 2012 and Spasyik, 2013 shows that, although they deal with the possible economic impact of the Park, they also indicate: (i) xenophobia, (ii) anti-establishment sentiment ('selling the country off') and (iii) becoming distanced from the situation. The simmering of xenophobic tensions is clear in people's dissatisfaction with being 'overtaken by China' (*kitaizatsiei*) of Belarus, their comments about Chinese people's characteristics – slitty-eyed (*uzkoglazye*), bad smelling, spreading like a virus, calculating and pragmatic, dog-eating, occupiers, will sleep with our women, will kick us off our land, etc. This theme of inter-ethnic tension involves Minskii himself, who is accused of being a traitor, a Jew and a homosexual.

Moreover, the online discussions are centred around a belief that there is ingrained corruption of the establishment and authorities' unaccountability, as well as a powerless citizenry. There are 'speculations' about the state's agenda (and wider geopolitical forces at play, which are mostly omitted from the state framing but present online and in Russian media (Under Red, 2016)), and an anticipation of the futility of campaigners' efforts ('doomed'). The posts convey the sense of apathy, lack of hope and low expectations (due to the feeling of powerlessness in a country with malfunctioning institutions and 'a lack of any previous experience of successful large-scale campaigning'). An ironic, or even cynical, attitude is evident in a repeated suggestion that the Park should be moved to *Drozdy* (near the Presidential residence), or radioactively-affected areas around Chernobyl.

On the whole, the online discussions expose a fragmented audience which is either unable or unwilling to unite for a common cause. The frames used signal a detachment from the situation, scepticism and loss of determination. The dissenters perceive themselves more as

[19] The channel followers are quite a unified community, as Marat announces the most popular (liked) comments in his consecutive video blog posts.

observers rather than as active agents of change and expose their estrangement from the situation. This passivity, negative attitude and distrust towards almost everyone (the establishment, grassroots movements and fellow citizens) illustrates the atomization of Belarusian society and a lack of shared solidarities. These fragmented solidarities can be understood within a 'dual pathway model' of collective action (Sturmer and Simon, 2004), as involvement in the Park's campaign represents the combination of a cost-benefit analysis and identification with the group. Despite a set of shared grievances, the online communication reveals a focus on an instrumental pathway (anticipation of the cost of their involvement, chances for material affluence (property rights) and immediate gratification), along with a reluctance to self-identify with the campaigners. This pervasive passivity and low self-categorization with the groups affected by the Park needs to be addressed by future research.

Conclusion

My analysis took it as axiomatic that Belarusian resistance movements have to operate within a hybridized system that combines an autocratic-bureaucratic Soviet system with more participative and empowering forms of digitally-mediated civic participation. Here, civic resistance is embedded in a particular understanding of democracy, citizenship norms and civic society, with public solidarities originating from value systems that are located at the intersection of past (collectivistic) and present (individualistic) local and foreign norms. For instance, changing attitudes towards the notion of 'collective' action were manifested in the precedence of personal over public gain, distrust of large-scale collective, politicized campaigning and formal institutional structures. It is, therefore, unsurprising that an attempt to institutionalize the Park protest movement through GP was perceived as an appropriation of the civic campaign's agenda and its conversion from a civic into a political effort (see Sherstobitov's Russian case study, 2014).

Most individuals got involved in the Park campaign on the grounds of 'place-based' solidarities (locality), mainly using traditional forms of collective participation whilst neglecting the potential of innovative digital communications. Overall, the campaigners demonstrated a preference for certain popular platforms and a limited set of communication formats. This highlights a complex intertwinement of contextual and media-related factors (pending further investigation), such as the degree of regulation of the communicative networks, digital divides, everyday media habits and attitudes, and self-censorship trends.

This study's focus on wider communicative post-Soviet ecologies exposes a complex asymmetric – rather than interdependent (Chadwick, 2013) – relationship between traditional and new media, which led to the appropriation, subversion and/or silencing of the protestors' frames. An agenda-setting scheme (where social media would mobilize the masses and traditional media could give a boost and credibility to the movement) failed to come to fruition. State media involvement (the TV show) was very cautious as not to satisfy the movement's need for mobilization, validation, empowerment and enlargement.

The state media framed the campaign foremost as an infringement of affected people's property ownership rights, at the expense of various other grievances. Representing the affected group as 'allotment owners' (*Dachniki*) or 'villagers' effectively reduced the significance of the issue for the wider public. Moreover, it side-lined a number of frames, including impacts on social welfare, the local job market, the environment, safety and inter-ethnic tension. Ultimately, the issue of (individual) ownership was substituted by the more general (national/collective) theme of the country's prosperity.

In turn, simmering discontent expressed online employed the frame of property rights as well as the frames of geopolitics, inter-ethnic tensions, state corruption and the government's

non-accountability. Interestingly, an 'alternative' media involvement (Marat Minskii's vlog) became a platform for mainstreaming extremely homophobic and xenophobic views, in online comments. Digital media communication also exposed the public's cynicism about and/or detachment from the situation (perceiving the issue as affecting someone else; adopting the position of observers rather than active agents; alienation from institutions and/or communication channels), signalling fragmented solidarities and pervasive distrust.

Despite the magnitude of the issue potentially affecting the capital (and, in the longer-term, the whole country) and its high emotional evocativeness, the movement failed to achieve any enduring engagement and sustained interest. This case study raises a question about the role of affect and its intersection with cognition (De Marco et al., 2017) and various contextual factors. There is a need for further research to explore under which circumstances and contexts one can form 'cumulative and cascading expressions of connective action, which may result in more substantial forms of political impact' (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 318). Further lines of inquiry pursuing either quantitative (e.g. big data analysis using the most popular dissenters' digital platforms) or qualitative approach (e.g. in-depth interviews with the dissenters) will shed light on these dilemmas. Mentioned above 'social parasite' taxation protest (BBC, 2017) will be one of the most immediate cases to explore.

The Park case is informative for the media specialists, as it illuminates the role of transnational (media) networks. While previous large-scale grassroots campaigns capitalized on their global media exposure, this dissent occurring at the 'periphery of media flow' in society largely marginalized and excluded from the transnational agenda was unable to utilise the global media exposure to (re)gain momentum. The findings are also useful for the policy-makers and NGO practitioners, as they clarify the role of distinct post-Soviet settings in disabling (Gilbert and Mohseni, 2018) citizens' collective action.

Finally, without becoming trapped by the notion of technological determinism, I need to clarify the potential that digital media offers for mediating civic engagement and challenging the existing status quo in a semi-authoritarian setting. Focusing on the effects that digital media-assisted forms of civic participation can have on political culture and institutions might not be particularly productive. Perhaps, by simply gradually building up its emancipatory potential, protest movements will be able to achieve a degree of success. This is certainly the case for such sensitive issues as LGBT activism in the region (Author, 2018). In adopting this stance, this paper moves away from an implicit expectation of any immediate and direct political consequences resulting from public mobilization online that has been adopted by previous scholarship in similar settings (e.g. Oates, 2013).

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